

The General Archive of the Nation: Discovering the past which made us

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A little bit of history

Since antiquity's oldest cultures, archives have served as the most valuable cultural storehouse of peoples, as well as a source of information essential to a good government's decision-making process. At the same

time as they safeguard one of the highest manifestations of the human intellect —written materials— they create and recreate culture.

In 1790 the Viceroy Juan Vicente de Güemes-Pacheco y Padilla, second Count of Revillagigedo, decided that it was urgent to organize the colony's archives. This being in line with the enlightened policy of strengthening the state, a search was begun for

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Photos: Archivo General de la Nación

The archive was located in the Palace of Communications (above) from 1973 to 1976.

an adequate place to preserve the documents of New Spain (as Mexico was known at that time).

Chapultepec was suggested as an appropriate site, since if kept there the documents would be safe from the floods frequently suffered by Mexico City, which was built in a valley of lakes. Yet this project was not carried through, and the most prized documents of the Spanish crown were placed in the colony's Royal Palace.

In 1823, shortly after Mexico gained independence, Lucas Alamán—a statesman with historical consciousness—promoted the creation of the General Public Archive of the Nation, which was also housed in what today is the National Palace.

The Archive remained there throughout the 19th century and only moved when the Ministry of Internal Affairs (today called *Gobernación*) separated from the Foreign Affairs ministry; it was taken over by the latter ministry because of the importance of historical antecedents for diplomatic negotiations, both in the process of gaining recognition for the country's independence and in the defense of Mexico's rights.

With the passage of time the space available in the National Palace became insufficient; some documents had to be transferred to the Santo Domingo Convent and later to the Temple of Guadalupe in Tacubaya, known as the Yellow House.

In the mid-20th century the proposal was made to relocate the National Archive and provide it with a building of its own, which would have the capacity to store the Americas' largest documentary repository—comparable, in terms of the number of Colonial manuscripts it contains, only with Seville's Archive of the Indies. The first project was to place it in the Ciudadela; then in University City, where the nation-

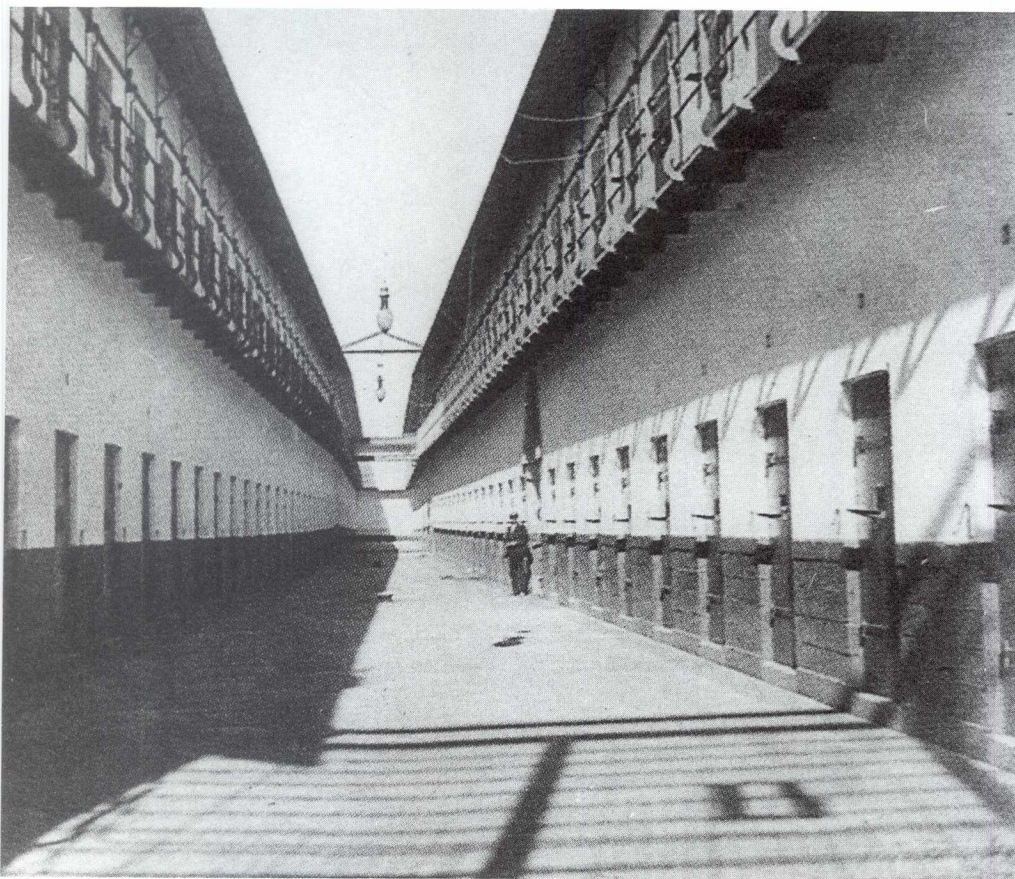


Frontispiece of fray Pedro de Gante's *Christian Doctrine in the Mexican Language*.

al library and periodicals archive are located today. However, in 1973 it was moved to the Palace of Communications, which is now the National Museum of Art—but the space there proved too small as well.

Lecumberri: From “Black Palace” to a storehouse of enlightenment

In 1976, the Lecumberri Penitentiary—inaugurated in 1900 by Porfirio Díaz, as yet another of the monumental works which dictatorial regimes often construct to adorn their regimes—was put out of service due to a new conception of social readaptation put forward by the jurist Sergio García Ramírez. The old



Cells, now used as reading rooms.

prison was better known as “The Black Palace” because of countless bitter hours lived by its inhabitants. This led to the idea of destroying the building so that no trace would be left of these horrors.

However, several voices were raised stressing the importance of conserving the building—whose stone walls were not responsible for what had occurred within them—and the need to preserve monuments which, in one way or another, are part of history and of a city’s identity.

Once the building had been saved, the historian Jesús Reyes Heróles, then Secretary of *Gobernación*, came up with the idea of making Lecumberri the Archive’s headquarters. This project was graced with the creativity of the architect Jorge L. Medellín and the talent of historian Alejandra Moreno Toscano, who recognized the big advantages that the building’s panoptical architecture offered for the construction of a documentary repository, a center for research

and recreation of culture. Instead of watching over prisoners, citizens would now watch over the acts of state; where darkness once prevailed, light would now shine.

Thus, the Black Palace was converted—in the words of one of its first directors, Ignacio Cubas—“into a storehouse of enlightenment, deeds and rights for generations of Mexicans”; into a torch illuminating our past and shedding light on our present.

Where a watchtower once overlooked cellblocks, today there is a huge cupola through which there enters a beam of light which illuminates researchers, students and citizens in general so they may participate in the adventure of discovering the past which made us.

The 860 cells arranged along the former prison’s seven-pointed star pattern house 322 documentary collections, six million images, 7,131 maps, 1,500 Colonial codices and countless public and private archives, ranging from a document by a 13th-century Spanish holy man to documents and images of our times.

Given its peculiar characteristics, the Lecumberri Palace, with its over 82,000 square feet of floor space, has demonstrated its functional character and suitability for the requirements of the General Archive of the Nation’s holdings. Forecasts have been made of the collections’ expansion, as well as the adaptations mandated by modern procedures for storing and reproducing materials. This has meant providing space for the library and periodicals collection. In 1989 the staff began a process of rearranging documents; over 17 linear miles of space were gained by replacing common shelving units with those specially designed for archives.

A priceless collection

Among the documents preserved in the General Archive of the Nation are the various national and state constitutions; Hernán Cortés' 1526 "Judgement of Residence"; Fray Pedro de Gante's "Christian doctrine in the Mexican language" and the "lawsuit" undertaken against Emperor Maximilian. They also include Emiliano Zapata's letters to Francisco Villa and the Aguascalientes Convention's minutes, as well as a great number of codices, edicts, architectural sketches, prisoners' songs, criminological statistics, engravings by José Guadalupe Posada and works that David Alfaro Siqueiros painted during his stay in the prison, lithographs, 1912 brochures of the Anti-Reelectionist Women's Front and the Daughters of the Revolution, amidst many other items.

The National Archive is also an inexhaustible source for both historical research and that related to other disciplines. The nine documentary divisions of its holdings include many as yet unexplored areas of enormous richness. The following are the nine divisions and some of the archives which contain the most information or are the most frequently consulted:

Documentation on Colonial Institutions: Correspondence of or about viceroys, the Hospital of Jesus, *infiendencias* (disloyal acts), the Inquisition, land holdings, etc.

Documentation on Public Administration, 1821-1910: Francisco I. Madero, Alvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, General Government Office, National Agrarian Commission.

Private Archives: Benito Juárez, Carlos Chávez and Emiliano Zapata.

Collections and Documents: Collection of Documents on

the History of the War of Independence, 1810-1821; Collection of Documents of the National Institute for Historical Research on the Mexican Revolution; Felipe Teixidor Collection and Pamphlet Collection.

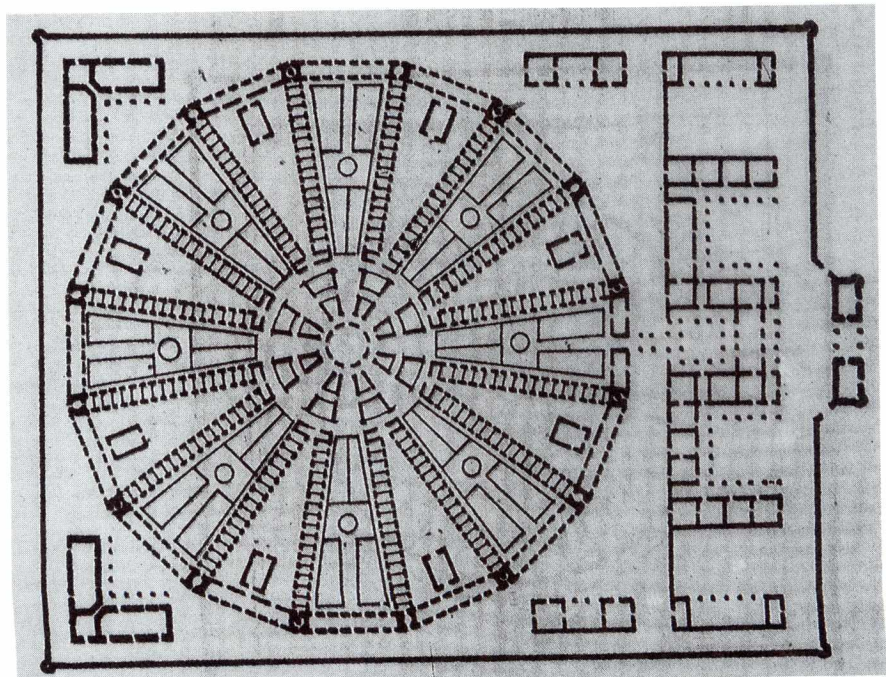
Illustrations and Cartography: Maps, plans and illustrations.

Photographic Archives and Collections: Díaz, Delgado and García Photographic Archive; Mayo Brothers Photographic Archive and Photographic Archive of Artistic and Literary Property.

Archival Microfilm and Photocopies: Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection from the University of Texas, and Mexican Genealogy and Heraldry Academy collection.

A center of information and culture

Disseminating the contents of the Archive's holdings is a key part of its work of preserving, arranging, describing and restoring the documents that make up the collective memory of the Mexican people. Every archive is a center for culture and must, therefore,



Floor plan of the old prisons "Panoptic" layout.

The Lecumberri Palace has demonstrated its functional character and suitability for the requirements of the General Archive of the Nation's holdings.

fulfill its social function of making its documentary legacy available to the citizenry.

We find ourselves not only at the end of a century and a millennium but at the beginning of a new era. This has led us to reformulate the role that archives must play, not just as guardians of our nation's documentary patrimony but as centers of information and culture, in order to contribute efficiently to the development of national culture.

This is why, in addition to organizing various documentary exhibitions, the General Archive of the

Nation plans to create a museum in the upper part of the cupola, where the public will be able to learn about the Archive's history as well as the richness of its holdings.

Other activities include the presentation of newly published books resulting from the research carried out at the Archive as well as every kind of cultural activity: art exhibits, lectures, concerts, theater and film programs.

Also afoot is a project to invite contemporary muralists to use the Lecumberri Palace's interior walls to depict archives' function as a source for the defense of the rights of all peoples, as repositories of culture and information centers, highlighting the need to know our past in order to understand our present. M